

FRENCH PENSION PROTEST

Students clash with police ahead of new demonstration

AFP, Paris

French protesters blocked key sites and clashed with police yesterday as unions called for further "massive" nationwide protests against President Nicolas Sarkozy's bid to raise the retirement age.

A female student was hospitalised during the latest scuffles, and one prosecutor voiced concern at the unprecedented numbers of schoolgirls involved in violent protests that Sarkozy slammed as "scandalous."

With no fuel left in more than a quarter of French petrol pumps, police are playing what unions have described as a game of cat and mouse with protesters at depots and refineries in a bid to prevent the country grinding to a halt.

The head of the powerful CGT union Bernard Thibault said that faced with government "intransigence" there was "no reason to stop these protests" and "we recommend further action from next week."

"We have to continue with the most massive actions possible," he told RMC radio. Unions are to meet in the afternoon to decide on holding further mass rallies, possibly on Tuesday, a week after the last protest.

More than a million people took to the streets then, the sixth day of action since September, to protest the unpopular plan

to raise minimum retirement from 60 to 62 and full pension payments from 65 to 67.

Workers in key sectors have been on strike for more than a week to protest the reform, which the government says is essential to reduce France's public deficit. Unions and political opponents say it penalises workers.

Sarkozy called days of unrest in the eastern city of Lyon, including looting, "scandalous" and vowed that "the troublemakers will not have the last word."

"This is not acceptable, they will be arrested, found and punished, in Lyon as elsewhere, without any weakness," Sarkozy said during a discussion southwest of Paris.

Youths have been fighting running battles with riot police in several cities, and on yesterday a schoolgirl was hospitalised during clashes with police outside a high school in the central city of Poitiers.

A student representative said the injured girl had three ribs broken after being beaten by a police truncheon. Police blamed jostling and denied anyone had been hit.

Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux said that more than 1,900 people had been arrested so far -- 245 people on Wednesday alone.

Police have arrested children as young as 10 at the demonstrations, some of

whom have been tried in juvenile courts.

An 18-year-old schoolgirl was jailed for a month in Lyon for having set fire to containers. The city's prosecutor Marc Desert noted the unprecedented "proportion of younger and younger girls" among troublemakers at protests.

Activists blocked access to Marseille airport for several hours before being cleared by police, causing tailbacks of several kilometres (miles).

Troops have also been sent in to clear rubbish from the streets of the Mediterranean port where collectors are on strike, while a similar strike in Toulouse intensified yesterday, with workers blocking access to dumps.

"The situation is unbearable," said Michel Sappin, central government representative or prefect for Marseille. "There's a real danger for the population."

US pop star Lady Gaga postponed two Paris concerts planned for the weekend "as a result of the logistical difficulties due to the strikes in France," her website said, "as there is no certainty that the trucks can make it."

The country's 12 oil refineries have been closed down, and Hortefeux said that 14 of 219 fuel depots were currently blocked by protesters despite Sarkozy ordering police to keep fuel flowing.



Masked youths damage a car during clashes in Lyon, southern France, during a demonstration to protest against the pensions reform. French protesters blocked key sites and clashed with police yesterday as unions called for further "massive" nationwide protests against President Nicolas Sarkozy's bid to raise the retirement age.

Bomb on bus kills nine in Philippines

AFP, Philippines

Nine people were killed yesterday when a bomb exploded aboard a packed passenger bus in the troubled southern Philippines, authorities said.

The military and police said Muslim militants or bandits who are known to operate on the southern island of Mindanao could have been behind the attack, with extortion the likely motive.

"The bus company has long been receiving extortion letters from armed groups operating in the region," regional military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Randolph Cabangbang said.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino told reporters in Manila he had ordered police to study how to boost security against likely and vulnerable targets of such attacks.

The bomb was apparently hidden inside a bag placed in a luggage compartment at the back of the bus, and exploded just after a group of men who were suspected to have planted it got off the vehicle, Cabangbang said.

Bus driver Arlan Tadeo, 38, said he parked the bus at the roadside and looked in the mirror again to see headless bodies and passengers raising their bloody arms as they screamed for help.

The bomb went off on a highway just outside Matalam town in a lightly populated farming area, largely planted with sugar cane.

Supreme Court to consider Suu Kyi appeal: lawyer

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's Supreme Court has agreed to consider opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's appeal against her house arrest, due to end days after controversial elections next month, her lawyer said yesterday.

The detention of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate has kept her off the scene for the country's first polls in 20 years, which have been dismissed by critics as a charade aimed at putting a civilian cloak over military rule.

Suu Kyi's last-ditch "special appeal" will be heard by a panel of three judges in the capital Naypyidaw on October 29, according to a notice posted outside the Yangon branch of the Supreme Court.

The democracy icon's current term of detention is due to end on November 13, although some fear the ruling generals may find an excuse to extend it.

Suu Kyi's lawyers say the current period of detention started with her imprisonment on May 14 and expect her to be freed next month, but they are continuing their efforts to have the conviction quashed.

"We are always hoping for the best," said one of her attorneys, Khin Htay Kywe. "We will try to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi before to prepare our arguments."

Suu Kyi lodged the last-ditch appeal in May. She has already had her appeal rejected twice,

most recently by the Supreme Court in February. Court verdicts in the army-ruled country rarely favour opposition activists.

Even if Suu Kyi is released, observers believe the pro-democracy leader is unlikely to be allowed full freedom to conduct political activities.

Suu Kyi, who has spent most of the past two decades locked up, had her detention extended by 18 months in August last year over a bizarre incident in which an American man swam uninvited to her lakeside home.

Her National League for Democracy won a landslide election victory in 1990 but was never allowed to take office.

The party has been forcibly abolished for boycotting the November 7 election, leaving the opposition in disarray. Prisoners are barred from standing as parliamentary candidates.

Western governments as well as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon have repeatedly said the vote will not be credible unless Suu Kyi and other opponents are freed.

The UN special envoy on rights in Myanmar, Tomas Ojea Quintana, cast new doubt Wednesday on the legitimacy of the election.

"Conditions for genuine elections are limited under the current circumstances," he said.

"Numerous political parties have complained of official harassment and intimidation. The potential for these elections to bring meaningful change and improvement to the human rights situation remains uncertain," he added.

Afghan peace body calls on Taliban to join talks

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan government peace body called on Taliban leaders yesterday to lay down their arms and enter talks to try to end a war now in its 10th year.

The High Council for Peace has been established to broker an end to a Taliban-led insurgency that has gained pace every year since the militia was ousted from power in the 2001 US-led invasion.

Two weeks after its inauguration, the body called on Taliban leaders to enter dialogue with the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai, pledging to listen to "legitimate demands".

"The High Council for Peace demands the armed opposition and their leaders avoid violence and join the peace process," said spokesman Qyamuddin Kashaaf, reading out the council's official "message".

"The peace council will listen to their legitimate demands and build trust among all sides under a sound political process", he said.

Israel starts 600 new settler homes since end of freeze

AFP, Jerusalem

Jewish settlers have started building at least 600 homes since the end of a building ban on September 26, a pace four times faster than before the freeze began last year, Peace Now said yesterday.

"In our estimation, building has started on between 600 and 700 new housing units in less than one month, which is four times the pace of construction since before the freeze," Peace Now's Hagit Ofran told AFP, referring to the moratorium that began at the end of November 2009.

Direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians are facing imminent collapse in a bitter row over settlement building on occupied West Bank land, which resumed after the end of the 10-month ban.

Israel has refused to reimpose the moratorium, while the Palestinians say they will not talk when settlers are building on occupied Palestinian land, prompting a flurry of US diplomatic efforts to resolve the deadlock.

Ofran said the surge in construction was to meet immediate demand for some 2,000 housing units, as part of a longer-term plan to build some 13,000 new homes, all of which had already been approved.

After the moratorium expired just over three weeks ago, Jewish settlers across the West Bank began building in earnest, although they were advised by the Israeli leadership to keep a low profile so as not to

inflare international condemnation.

As bulldozers lumbered into action, the Palestinian leadership held back on a threat to abandon talks, with president Mahmud Abbas and Arab diplomats agreeing to give Washington a few extra weeks grace period to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

Although the freeze did not cover building in Arab east Jerusalem, Ofran said there had been a "certain slow-down" in construction there since a visit in March by US Vice President Joe Biden.

In an announcement which was seen as a slap in the face for the visiting Biden, Israel said it would build 1,600 new settler homes in east Jerusalem, prompting a major crisis with Washington.

Since then, Israel has not signed off on any new building in the east -- until last week, when it approved plans for another 240 homes in the settlement neighbourhoods of Pisgat Zeev and Ramot.

The move was sharply condemned by the Palestinians, who accused Israel of being intent on "killing" every opportunity to revive peace talks between the two sides.

Netanyahu has so far refused to reimpose the freeze, largely because he lacks support for such a move within his rightwing coalition.

About 500,000 Israelis live in more than 120 settlements across the West Bank, including annexed Arab east Jerusalem -- territories the Palestinians want for their promised state.

Nato soldier, 4 Afghan police killed in attack

AFP, Kabul

A Nato soldier and four Afghan police were killed in attacks in Afghanistan yesterday, officials said.

The soldier died following "an insurgent attack", Nato's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said in a statement, without further detail.

The death brings to 598 the number of foreign troops killed in Afghanistan so far this year, according to an AFP tally based on the independent casualties.org website.

The total for 2009, the second deadliest year, was 521.

In western Herat province, four Afghan police officers were killed and another injured when a Taliban-style bomb struck their vehicle, the interior ministry said.

The ministry condemned the attack as an act of "un-Islamic and inhumane" insurgents.

Roadside bombs, also known as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), are the main weapon of Taliban-led insurgents who have been fighting the Western-backed government since being overthrown in a US-led invasion in late 2001.

The bombs are detonated by remote control or by pressure as vehicles pass over them. They are cheap and easy to make, but difficult to detect.

They exact a deadly toll on the 150,000 international troops under US and Nato command, accounting for many of the almost 600 killed so far this year.



Buddhist monks from Thailand, Japan, China, Tibet and other countries release sky lanterns before the 80 foot statue of Buddha in Bodhgaya, India's Bihar state, on Tuesday in a call for renewable energy as a solution to Bihar's power crisis.

Malaysian PM warns against 'destructive' race debate

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Prime Minister Najib Razak yesterday moved to silence a debate over the rights of majority Malays, saying it could cause racial conflict that would destroy the nation's achievements.

Najib raised the spectre of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda, and the Holocaust in Europe, as he warned against the airing of inflammatory views in a country which experienced deadly racial riots in the 1960s.

"If we open these issues to debate, we worry that it will cause a return to a primordial instinct in relations among the various races," he said in a keynote address to his ruling party's annual congress.

Multicultural Malaysia was founded half a century ago on an agreement that Muslims Malays and indigenous tribes would be handed special privileges in return for citizenship for ethnic Chinese and Indians.

The "social contract" which effectively acknowledged Malay control over government, and a positive discrimination policy introduced later to close the wealth gap with Chinese who dominate the economy, are increasingly resented.

But Najib, who is gearing up for elections expected next year, called for an end to a debate which he said had "hurt" Malays.

"If we question this agreement then we will destroy the trust and respect that each of us has in each other," he told delegates from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

"This is very dangerous, I repeat, very dangerous for a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia because it has the potential to destroy all of that has been achieved in the last 50 years," he said.

"Whether we like it or not, we must respect this agreement that was reached because it is the key to our national survival," he told a packed hall of party delegates.

The UMNO-led Barisan Nasional coalition, which has ruled Malaysia since independence, is struggling to respond to a drubbing in 2008 polls which saw minorities flock to the opposition.

It now faces the loss of a growing number of Malays -- its political bedrock -- to the conservative Islamic party PAS which is part of the opposition alliance.

Najib, who has the difficult task of luring back support from both Malays and minorities while not alienating either side with strong rhetoric, admitted that UMNO needed to reform to meet the needs of all Malaysians.

"We have achieved what we have together with the various races in order to build this nation," he said.

The premier defended the controversial positive discrimination policy for Malays, which gives them benefits in education, housing and employment, but admitted that its implementation had left much to be desired.

Unesco drops prize sponsored by Equatorial Guinea's Obiang

AFP, Paris

The United Nations cultural organisation Unesco bowed to pressure from anti-corruption campaigners yesterday and suspended a science prize named after Equatorial Guinea's President Teodoro Obiang Nguema.

The organisation's executive board met in Paris and decided to put the award on hold "and continue consultations among all parties concerned, in a spirit of mutual respect and until a consensus is reached."

The Unesco-Obiang Prize for the Life Sciences was created by the board in 2008, and Equatorial Guinea was to finance it for five years for a total of three million dollars (2.14 million euros).

It will now not be awarded until Unesco members reach a new consensus.

"I take note of this decision by our member states, which has been reached by consensus and with respect and dignity towards all concerned parties," Unesco director general Irina Bokova said in a statement.

Human rights and anti-poverty campaigners were outraged that the United Nations body would lend its support to a prize named after a leader they consider a "corrupt dictator".

"The way Teodoro Obiang has governed Equatorial Guinea undermines all the values Unesco stands for," said Tutu Alicante, head of the pressure group EG Justice, according to a statement from Human Rights Watch.

"The suspension is a sign that the Obiang government cannot pull the wool over the eyes of the international community with empty human rights public relations campaigns. We will continue working for the prize's cancellation."



Farinas spent four months on hunger strike this year

Farinas wins Sakharov rights prize

AFP, Strasbourg

The European parliament awarded yesterday its prestigious Sakharov human rights prize to Cuban dissident Guillermo Farinas, parliamentary sources told AFP.

"The Sakharov winner is Guillermo Farinas," a source said on condition of anonymity.

The 48-year-old journalist and psychologist has often used hunger strikes, putting his own health at risk, as a means of protest to achieve greater freedoms in the Communist island of Cuba.

Farinas is the third Cuban to receive the prize, after Oswaldo Paya in 2002 and the "Ladies in White" group of women whose husbands are jailed in Cuba, which received the award in 2005.

European parliament president Jerzy Buzek will officially announce Farinas as the winner of the Sakharov Prize later yesterday. The award will be presented to the winner on December 15.

Hosni Mubarak to seek sixth term: party official

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's octogenarian President Hosni Mubarak, in power for 30 years and whose health has raised questions, is to run for re-election in 2011, a high-ranking ruling party official said yesterday.

"The candidate of the National Democratic Party (NDP) will be President Mohammed Hosni Mubarak. At that moment, the candidate will be Mohammed Hosni Mubarak," Ali El Din Hilal said in an interview broadcast by Arabic-language US satellite TV channel Alhurra.

"The candidate of the National Democratic Party in October next year, God willing, will be President Mohammed Hosni Mubarak," Hilal repeated.

Hilal, who is in charge of communications for the NDP, later told AFP the president's candidacy was in keeping with "the will of the leadership" of the ruling party.

"He is our nominee for the presidency" in the next election, said the senior official, without elaborating, although the NDP has stressed in the past that a candidate would not be decided before the end of this year.

Mubarak, 82, has never stated whether he will run for what would be a sixth six-year term.

Political observers question whether he is up to the task, particularly after he underwent surgery in March to have his gall bladder and a duodenal polyp removed.

There has been widespread speculation that his son, Gamal, will be put forward as his potential successor.